

# Photius and Poetry

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'No art or science, except poetry, was foreign to this universal scholar'. Thus Edward Gibbon. It has long been notorious that poets are excluded from the *Bibliotheca*. Why? The question persists.<sup>1</sup> Hence the present paper.

Certain poets were, of course, studied at school. Above all, Homer. He was the one poet genuinely familiar, for instance, to the pretentious Anna Comnena; it is unlikely that Michael Psellus was unique in having the entire *Iliad* by heart at the age of fourteen.<sup>2</sup> Fairly standardized selections of Tragedy and Comedy were read, and so on. The details are too familiar to require elaboration.<sup>3</sup>

However, this was education *scholae non vitae*. Both church and state required officials proficient in Attic or Atticist prose.<sup>4</sup> A man had to show learning, display a gift for rhetorical preamble, and at the same time be intelligible. There was no room for a Lexiphanes in the system.

1. It is not tackled in two important articles, hereinafter referred to by authors' names: La Rue Van Hook, 'The Literary Criticism in the *Bibliotheca* of Photius', *Classical Philology*, IV (1909), 178–89; G. L. Kustas, 'The Literary Criticism of Photius', *Hellenika*, XVII (1962), 132–69.

2. For Anna and Psellus in this Homeric context, see G. Buckler, *Anna Comnena* (Oxford, 1929), pp. 197–202.

3. See, e.g., J. E. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, I (Cambridge, 1903), pp. 402–3. The present paper hopes to be a little more ambitious than Sandys whose explanation of the problem in cause consisted of the sentence 'Possibly the learned author was more partial to prose'.

4. For this, and for many other related matters, see the valuable paper of N. G. Wilson, 'The Church and Classical Studies in Byzantium', *Antike und Abendland*, XVI (1970), 68–77.

The ideal models for aspirants were not so much *oi ἀρχαῖοι*, but later Atticist practitioners. Consideration of the contents of the *Bibliotheca* is instructive. Apart from the canonical Ten Attic Orators, there are virtually no classical authors. This applies to prose almost as much as to poetry. Historiography, one of the two genres most fully treated by Photius, is represented only by Herodotus (cod. 60), Ctesias (cod. 72), and Theopompus (cod. 176). There are no separate notices of Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, or of any other historian before the last century B.C. Also omitted from the compilation are Plato and Aristotle. Theophrastus is noted, but only for his scientific works (cod. 278).

Given all this, the exclusion of poets is somewhat less striking. The *Bibliotheca* reflects the practical priorities of Byzantine life. Poetry was appropriate to school, to a few professional scholars, and as an occasional rhetorical adornment. But it was on the periphery of Byzantine culture and achievement. Not one acknowledged poet of greatness was produced in over a thousand years of Byzantine civilization. Nor (at least after the age of Justinian) is there any particular likelihood that, had one appeared, he would have been appropriately recognized and esteemed.

Outside the *Bibliotheca*, Photius' attitude to poetry is consonant. It is patent that he was not a major contributor to sacred verse. His voluminous prose works rarely adduce a poet. Aratus is once mentioned (*Amph. Quaest.* 151), a small reflection of the Byzantine interest in didactic verse. Callimachus is cited on the mendacity of Cretans (*Amph. Quaest.* 151), but such a proverbial notion hardly betokens any deep familiarity with this poet. More interesting is the reference to the Prologue of the *Lamia* (*Amph. Quaest.* 150), one of the most obscure of the lost plays of Euripides, and surely not widely known in the Byzantine age.<sup>5</sup>

A man might be expected to show off his literary learning in his published letters. Photius has little or nothing on parade by way of a poet. The one item of interest is the judgement of Aristophanes as *ὁ καλὸς κορυφαῖος* (*Ep.* 39). That playwright's

5. It may or may not be signal that one of the very few other sources to cite the *Lamia* was also a Christian, specifically Lactantius, *Inst.* 1. 6. 8; cf. Nauck's *Tragicorum graecorum fragmenta* (1964 edition, revised by Snell), pp. 506–7.

*Plutus* is elsewhere (*Ep.* 146) alluded to, but this was the play of Aristophanes most commonly read by Byzantines.<sup>6</sup> All in all, the paucity of references to poets and poetry bears out the comment of the Patriarch's pupil Leo (who was to be appointed Professor of Mathematics at Constantinople by Bardas) that to enter the 'diviner lore' of rhetoric under Photius was tantamount to bidding farewell to the Muses.

So much by way of what might be termed a general context and explanation of poetry from the *Bibliotheca*. Next, more particular and rationalizing reasons can be brought in. The vexed problems raised by Photius' prefatory letter to his brother Tarasius are known to all students of the *Bibliotheca*. Mercifully, the issue of whether the compilation was made at Constantinople or Bagdad is not central to the present enquiry.<sup>7</sup> I accept with most modern scholars (against Krumbacher) that the letter reflects a real state of affairs and is not a literary fiction.<sup>8</sup>

It is commonly believed that the difficult and ambiguous Greek of this letter discloses some sort of literary club at which Photius and his friends gathered to hear works of Greek (there is no hint of any Latin works) literature, pagan and christian, read aloud.<sup>9</sup> Some little verisimilitude is furnished by the statement (cod. 268) that there was no time to hear the speeches of Lycurgus. If such gatherings really did take place, we have a splendid example of the gulf between Byzantine and modern tastes and endurance. For whereas poetry was not usually read, several lexica were intoned to what Bury well called the patient audience (codd. 145–58).

Tarasius had apparently requested Photius to compile a list of those books read at sessions at which he had not been able to

6. On this, see K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (London, 1972), p. 226.

7. Apart from the Introduction to Henry's Budé edition, pp. xix–xx, see B. Hemmerdinger's two articles in *BZ*, LXIV (1971), 37, and *REG*, LXIX (1956), 101–3.

8. See, e.g., N. G. Wilson, 'The composition of Photius' *Bibliotheca*', *GRBS*, IX (1968), 451–4; cf. T. Hagg, 'Photius at Work: Evidence from the Text of the *Bibliotheca*', *GRBS*, XIV (1973), 213–22.

9. On the existence of the club, see Wilson's article in the above note; cf. J. B. Bury, *History of the Eastern Roman Empire* (London, 1912), pp. 446–7. It could, however, be maintained that Photius' Greek, assuming use of the royal plural, is referring to readings with Tarasius alone.

attend. Various inferences are possible. Poetry was never read, therefore it is automatically excluded. Or it could be that Tarasius had attended sessions at which it was, hence Photius had no need to register the poets in question. Again, perhaps the *Bibliotheca* represents only one or more seasons (reckoned perhaps by years?) of the club's activities, periods in which both poets and the other classics had not been read. Or maybe Tarasius was known to his brother to be uninterested in poetry, in which case Photius would obviously omit its practitioners from his compilation.

Given our lack of knowledge of both Tarasius and the situation in general, all such speculations are legitimate. However, there is a further matter, one that may support the view that the taste represented by the *Bibliotheca* is that of the Patriarch himself.

For it is not strictly true that poetry is everywhere excluded. Two notices (codd. 183–4) discuss various hexametric productions from the pen of Eudocia, empress and wife of Theodosius II. In the first of these entries, Photius offers several comments on poetry which may help us understand the absence of the classic poets from his compendium.

Eudocia's verse paraphrase of the *Octateuch* was 'as clear as the genre of epic allows'. The quality of *σαφηνετα*, a cliché from Lucian and Galen down to the polemics surrounding Arethas' obscurity, is constantly extolled in the *Bibliotheca*.<sup>10</sup> Eudocia is also commended for keeping to her subject, in spite of writing in verse. This is a high compliment from Photius, who abhorred digressions in the prose writers reviewed by him.<sup>11</sup> Most to the point is the Patriarch's assertion that Eudocia 'did not succumb to the usual poetic abuse of distorting the truth in order to please young ears'.

This last judgement is clearly redolent of Plato's censure of poets in the *Republic*. A slight similarity of expression at one point may suggest that Photius wished the connection to be overt. Plato had laid it down (*Rep.* 387b) that *δοξ ποιητικώτερα, τσοῦτω ἦτιον ἀκουστέον παισί*; Photius objects to poetry for its tendency *ἡδύνειν μειρακίων ὄτα*.

10. A point made clear by Van Hook and (with fuller documentation) Kustas; cf. E. Orth, *Photiana* (Leipzig, 1929), pp. 94–8.

11. See, e.g., cod. 72 on Herodotean divagations; cf. Van Hook, 179.

It is true that Photius is elsewhere critical of Neoplatonist enthusiasms, and that too much zeal for Plato's own doctrines could be viewed with suspicion, as the troubles of Psellus and John Italos show.<sup>12</sup> However, this must be balanced by the case of Anna Comnena, who brags of her study of Plato.<sup>13</sup> It is to be remembered that it was Neoplatonism that was the proper target of the faithful, since that creed had been one of the last bastions against Christianity back in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>14</sup> This is evidenced by the pagan hagiographer Eunapius, a writer strongly condemned by Photius (cod. 77).

Poetry, then, by its very nature, was inclined to violate the most cherished stylistic criteria of Photius. His comment (cod. 79) that the style of the historian Candidus was 'too poetic' is revealing. It should be borne in mind that his aesthetic was very much influenced by Hellenistic and later critics such as Hermogenes,<sup>15</sup> whose interests were in prose. Notably in oratory, a taste reflected in the *Bibliotheca*, as was earlier seen, by the emphasis placed on the Ten Attic Orators.

Furthermore, classical poetry always posed more of a moral problem for Christian critics. Pagan deities and licentious myths were far more prevalent in the poets than the prose writers. A Christian was safer amidst the historians and the rhetoricians, the categories most dwelt upon (with the obvious exception of ecclesiastical writings) in the Patriarch's compendium.

Photius was not totally straitlaced. His interest in the novel is pronounced, and he can be indulgent<sup>16</sup> to the writers of fiction, probably because their heroes and villains were human, not divine. However, the critic was shocked by the 'obscurity' of Achilles Tatius, and thought that Iamblichus went too far in this direction, compared with Heliodorus.<sup>17</sup>

The literary criticism of Photius is subordinate to the main facts of his life. He was teacher, churchman, and (no criticism is

12. See Wilson, 71 (article cited in n. 4 above).

13. *Alexiad*, *praef.* 1; cf. Buckler, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

14. Wilson (see n. 12) perhaps does not sufficiently distinguish between attitudes to Plato and to Neoplatonism.

15. The Photian debt to Hermogenes is fully demonstrated by Kustas.

16. Notably towards Lucian (of all people), cod. 128, whose *Dialogues of the Courtesans* are approved; however, the *Asinus* is denounced for its obscenity (cod. 129).

17. Codd. 87 (Achilles Tatius), 94 (Iamblichus).

intended) careerist. A conscientious teacher ought to steer his followers towards orthodox morality and a good career. Prose was safer than poetry, Atticist prose the best practical training for advancement. It should be iterated that the classic poets are not the only signal omission from the *Bibliotheca*.

This, allied to Photius' own skills and temperament (he exhibits little competence or interest in sacred verse) and to his conditioning by reliance upon earlier critics who concentrated their efforts on prose, conspired to keep the *Bibliotheca* virtually innocent of poetry.<sup>18</sup> The exception helps to prove the case. For the two notices of Eudocia's metrical effusions, frequently overlooked, should not be left out of account, especially as the first of them goes some way towards helping to explain the celebrated absence of poets from the Patriarch's criticism.<sup>19</sup>

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18. There are scattered allusions (they can be pieced together from Henry's Budé or the Index in *MPG*, CIV, 1461–1516), but they are usually in quotations. It is, however, to be observed that Photius did study critical surveys of at least some poets; see cod. 158 (Phrynichus), cod. 239 (the *Chrestomathia* of Proclus).

19. One has to bear in mind that *Bibliotheca* is not the original title, and that it would therefore be improper to expect of Photius a complete survey of literature. See Henry's Introduction, p. xx, n. 2; cf. A. Diller, 'Photius' *Bibliotheca* in Byzantine Literature', *DOP*, XVI (1962), 389–96.